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ABSTRACT

Only with the beginnings of a structural system of social classes in America--a system based on both wealth and education--did an ethic of gentility and "correctness" arise in American attitudes toward speaking and writing. Rhetorical instruction was forced to move away from the abstract educational ideal of "mental discipline" and toward the immediate instructional goal of simple mechanical correctness. Skill in writing, which had traditionally meant the ability to manipulate a complex hierarchy of content-based, organizational, and stylistic goals, came to mean but one thing--error avoidance. The mechanical grading and evaluation that ensued invited mechanical support systems, usually in the form of systems of rules to which students could be referred. Materials on mechanical correctness bloomed, and in 1907 there appeared a new sort of textbook--the logical culmination of the move toward rule-governed composition--the modern composition handbook. After 1925, handbooks and handbook-rhetorics were in control of college composition classes. Following close behind were drillbooks and workbooks that introduced completely arhetorical practice in error-recognition and sentence construction. Criticism and opposition to this tradition began in the late 1940s, gathered strength during the 1950s and suddenly burst into full flower during the early 1960s. The problem today is striking a balance between traditionalists and rhetoricians. (HOD)

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MECHANICAL CORRECTNESS IN COMPOSITION INSTRUCTION

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"He that despiseth little things shall perish little by little."

- Apocrypha

Throughout most of its history as a college subject, English composition has meant one thing to most people: the single-minded enforcement of standards of mechanical and grammatical correctness in writing. The image of a grim-faced Miss Grundy, besprinkling the essays of her luckless students with scarlet handbook hieroglyphs, is still a common stereotype; it is only in the last twenty-five years that composition instructors have seriously begun to question the priority given to simple correctness in college-level instruction. Most scholars of rhetorical history have wondered at some time about the forces which turned "rhetoric" into "composition," transformed instruction in wide-ranging techniques of persuasion and analysis into a narrow concern for convention on the most basic levels, transmogrified the noble discipline of Aristotle, Cicero, Campbell, into a stultifying error-hunt. In this essay I would like to examine some of those forces, both cultural and pedagogical, which shaped nineteenth-century rhetorical history and resulted in the obsession with mechanical correctness which for so many years defined the college course in written rhetoric.

The required course in English composition is a uniquely American institution. Less than any other college subject has it been informed by a genuine body of knowledge crying out to be disseminated; more than any other subject it has been shaped by perceived social and cultural needs. College

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writing courses began in the nineteenth century as rhetoric lectures in the traditional British mold, studying mental faculties, taste, style, and belles-lettres. The general spirit of the age, however, was one of radical equalitarianism, and culturally there was little pressure for formal correctness in writing. Only with the beginnings of a structured system of social classes in America-- a system based both on wealth and on education-- did an ethic of gentility and "correctness" arise in Americans' attitudes toward speaking and writing. Around the same time, new pedagogical techniques in the teaching of vernacular grammar ingrained the habit of scrutinizing sentences for errors. With the growth of a native literary-intellectual culture--in specific, an identifiable college and university culture-- linguistic insecurity arose, and it was exacerbated by post-Civil War evidence that the writing abilities of new college freshmen were indeed atrocious. The result: the first "back-to-the-basics" movement, the first stab at remedial college English. Teachers were swamped with "themes" to "correct," and their overwork created a booming business in supportive educational technology-- handbooks, workbooks, etc.--meant to aid them in their drudgery. These tools came all too quickly to control their masters, however, and the subsequent history of composition instruction until recently is a history of poorly-trained instructors pressed by overwork and circumstance to enforce the most easily-perceived standards of writing--mechanical standards--while ignoring or shortchanging more difficult and rhetorical elements.

Things are better now, but this is a sad enough story--a story of well-meaning teachers and administrators swept by ignorance and short-sightedness through an eighty-year pedagogical bad dream. To understand how it all began, we must go back to the first third of the nineteenth century and examine the attitudes toward language, culture, and education held at that time.

Attitudes Toward Language in the Early Nineteenth Century

During the first fifty years of the nineteenth century, the new nation of the United States was striving to define itself as a culture. Jeffersonian and then Jacksonian democracy had produced an ethic of equalitarianism that extended into all areas of national life, including education and language. During the earlier part of the century, Americans tended to be almost contentious in their rejection of imposed hierarchies of value; it was a unique cultural situation, and was due partially to the American educational structure. In 1831, when Alexis de Tocqueville made his tour of the United States, he saw thousands of public elementary schools but relatively few colleges.[1] As Tocqueville put it, "there is no other country in the world where, proportionally to population, there are so few ignorant and so few learned individuals as in America. Primary education is within reach of all; higher education is hardly available to anybody."[2]

The equality of prospect which Tocqueville marked as the most obvious feature of American democracy was to have several effects upon the national attitude toward language use. Most people were taught reading and writing in elementary school and emerged at the age of twelve or so with all the schooling they were to see; thus grew up a common denominator of expression. For a time, it seemed that linguistic class distinctions would disappear:

> . . .when men are no longer held to a fixed social position, when they continually see one another and talk together, when castes are destroyed and classes change and merge, all of the words of a language get mixed up too. Those which cannot please the majority die; the rest form a common stock from which each man chooses at random. . .Not only does everyone use the same words, but they get into the habit of using them without discrimination. The rules of style are destroyed. Hardly any expressions seem, by their nature, vulgar, and hardly any seem refined.[3]

Tocqueville visited a nation in which elementary schools were emphasizing grammar instruction as an abstract "mental discipline" and where only a very few men could aspire to college training--training which led nearly inevitably to the closed circles of pulpit and bar. Such college-educated men were too few and too specialized to provide a real linguistic aristocracy, and thus for a time the common denominator prevailed in language.

Nineteenth-century America, however, was a culture in transition, and the linguistic leveling that Tocqueville reported was beginning to melt away even as he published his first volume of Democracy in America. The period 1830-1870 saw the rise of forces that would gradually overcome the equalitarianism of the earlier part of the century. At some point after 1840, the common denominator stopped falling and began to rise as Americans became aware of and concerned about their speaking and writing habits.

The reasons for this awakening interest in correctness of usage and the niceties of grammatical construction are both cultural and pedagogical. Culturally, the period 1820 through 1860 was the "American Renaissance," an era that saw the rise of a secular literary-intellectual culture in America. For the first time, the New World produced writers and poets who could stand with the best of the Old--and who also wished to stand separate from the old. Tocqueville's comment that "American authors may fairly be said to live more in England than in America," might have seemed accurate in 1831, but by 1840 it was rapidly becoming outdated by such writers as Irving, Hawthorne, Poe, Emerson, and many others. The "frontier" was being pushed westward, and Eastern cities were developing cosmopolitan attributes, generating indigenous intellectual elites and atmospheres far removed from the rough-and-tumble equalitarianism of the earlier part of the century. Classes, based both upon

wealth and upon education, were beginning to form-- and where there is class distinction, linguistic distinctions are not far behind.[4]

In addition, the character of school instruction in language was also changing. As Rollo Lyman has shown, grammar instruction in the United States became an important aspect of primary education:

> English grammar gained momentum as the hold of Latin Grammar weakened (during the post-Revolutionary War period), and by the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century it became so generally taught that the common term grammar school, formerly applied to the secondary school of the Latin-grammar type, was now by common consent used to designate an intermediate school with English grammar as its central study. After 1825 the prominence of English grammar became gradually more marked, until it reached its height about 1850-1875.[5]

Lyman calls the period around 1860 "the heyday of grammar," and it is no accident that it coincides with the first great period of American linguistic insecurity.

This rise of interest in vernacular grammar had led by the 1840's to a new awareness on Americans' parts of the concepts of "correctness" and "grammaticality." In large part, this new awareness resulted from new instructional methods in grammar classes. Lindley Murray, whose immensely popular English Grammar was the best-selling grammar text in America prior to 1825, utilized a "correct-incorrect" duality borrowed from the pedagogy used to enforce the learning of Latin grammar, and his approach emphasized a binary, good-or-bad attitude toward each sentence studied. Samuel Kirkham, whose 1829 English Grammar in Familiar Lectures took up the market as Murray began to falter, made heavy use of "false-syntax" exercises--lists of sentences larded with errors in grammar and usage which students were supposed to identify and correct. These exercises fostered an attitude of suspicion toward everything written, and as Edward Finegan suggests, Murray and Kirkham

have to be held at least partly responsible for later negativistic and absolutist attitudes toward language.[6]

The age of Victorian gentility was beginning, and in the 1840's we begin to see a new movement in the United States, a movement whose desiderata were proper usage and grammatical correctness in speech and writing. This new interest seems to have sprung from two distinct proximate causes: the Eastern reaction against the "roughness" and "crudeness" of frontier America, an attitude which wished to set standards of propriety in language as in all other aspects of life; and the desire for self-improvement and "getting ahead," which was an important part of the American mythos during the nineteenth century. These two elements were found mixed into most of the early works on "good language." The first can be seen clearly during the late 1840's in an address given to the Newburyport Girls' High School by Andrew Peabody, chaplain at Harvard College. Peabody spoke to the girls on "Conversation," and the point of his remarks was that his audience should strive to establish a proper and correct linguistic ambience about them, should "raise the tone" where they were:

> Young ladies do more than any other class in the community towards establishing the general tone and standard of social intercourse. . .you are fast approaching an age when you will take prominent places in general society; will be the objects of peculiar regard; and will, in a great measure, determine whether the social converse in your respective circles shall be vulgar or refined. . .[7]

Peabody goes on to warn against faulty pronunciation, "ungrammatical vulgarisms," and other "untasteful practices" in conversation. His Handbook of Conversation: Mistakes of Speaking and Writing Corrected included this address as well as several other short pieces of linguistic prescription, and it remained in print from 1855 through 1882. Peabody's Handbook shows how early the cultural lines between "refined" and "vulgar" language were being

drawn. His use of "vulgar" is especially noteworthy; it is not a term previously heard very often in America outside of lectures on rhetoric. It is an essentially elitist term foreign to the ethos of Jeffersonian and Jacksonian democracy, but through the forties, fifties, and sixties we will hear it used more and more.

In 1847, the year that Peabody first gave his Newburyport address, there appeared a book less popular but more important as a harbinger of things to come. This was Seth T. Hurd's self-improvement manual, A Grammatical Corrector. Between 1826 and 1834, Hurd had spent his winters as a "public lecturer" on English Grammar, probably at the Lyceums then coming to popularity. In his capacity as a travelling lecturer--a sort of early Chautauqua figure--he visited "almost every section of the United States." Hurd explained his method thus: "The common errors and peculiarities of speech, which were found to prevail in different communities, were carefully noted down and preserved, not only as a source of amusement (to myself), but for the purpose of correction and comment in the Lecture-room."[8] Given this modus operandi, it is no wonder that Hurd kept moving on. The epigraph on his title page describes the contents of the Grammatical Corrector better than anything else:

> Being a collection of nearly two thousand barbarisms, cant pharases, colloquialisms, quaint expressions, provincialisms, false pronunciation, perversions, misapplications of terms and other kindred errors of the English language peculiar to the different States of the Union. Thw whole explained, corrected, and conveniently arranged for the use of schools and private individuals.

Painful though it might have been for them, Hurd's audiences in the 1830's were interested in having their "barbarisms" corrected, in being told that "done up brown" was "a very low phrase." The general audiences at such

Lyceum lectures obviously had wider agendas than mere politeness or gentility; theirs was an interest in self-improvement that must have been much concerned with getting ahead as it was with "raising the tone." Hurd was more than an early Victorian John Simon, shaking his readers down while he attacked their language habits as "uneducated," "impolite," "inelegant," and "vulgar"; there are elements of Dale Carnegie's commercial approach to influencing businessmen in his book as well.

Usage, Correctness, and Social Position

These beginnings of linguistic status-anxiety in the 1840's and fifties grew stronger in the 1860's, when much of the American intellectual community was inflamed by a small book written by an Englishman. A Plea for the Queen's English, by Henry Alford, who was Dean of Westminster and a noted British intellectual, appeared in 1864; it would see eleven British and American printings and remain in print until 1893. In it, "the Dean," as he was called by his opponents and fellow controversialists, attacked much current usage, both literary and popular, striking out at poor pronunciation, wrong words, improper sentence construction, and other "objectionable" misuses of English. The Dean's book raised a number of hackles in England, but to Americans it was a particularly stinging rebuke, for Alford was bitterly anti-American in addition to being a linguistic purist:[9]

> . . .the language of a people is no trifle. The national mind is reflected in the national speech. . .Every important feature in a people's language is reflected in its character and history.
>
> Look, to take one familiar example, at the process of deterioration which our Queen's English has undergone at the hands of the Americans. Look at those phrases which so amuse us in their speech and books; at their reckless imagination, and contempt for congruity; and then compare the character and history of the nation--its blunted sense of moral obligation and duty to man; its disregard for conventional right where aggrandizement is to be

> obtained. . .Such examples as this. . .may serve to show that language is no trifle.[10]

These was fightin' words in 1864, and America was not long in producing champions to field against the Dean. The great prescriptive-usage war of the Victorian era was on.

Best known of the Dean's antagonists in these debates were George Washington Moon, an expatriate American living in England, and Edward S. Gould, a New York journeyman intellectual. Moon slashingly attacked Alford's own grammar and usage in his The Dean's English of 1865 and Bad English of 1867. Gould's contribution was published in 1867 as Good English: or Popular Errors in Language, and it shows how conscious the American reading public was becoming of language:

> The present age is pre-eminently an age of progress; and, unfortunately, the progress is not limited to "things of good report." Error follows fast upon the footsteps of truth, and sometimes truth is left behind in the race.
>
> For example, the English language, within the last quarter of a century, through the agency of good writers, critics, and lexicographers, has in many respects been greatly improved; but, through the heedlessness of those who should be its conservators, and the recklessness of those who have been, and are, its corruptors, it has deteriorated in other respects in a greater proportion.[11]

Dean Alford was wrong about where the deterioration lay, argued Gould and Moon, but neither argued that it did not exist. In fact, the deterioration of English at the hands of uneducated frontiersmen was what these Easterners excoriated most violently. A linguistic base for class distinctions seems to be the hidden agenda of this debate. Richard Meade Bache put the case most clearly in the preface to his 1869 Vulgarisms and Other Errors of Speech:

> Many persons, although they have not enjoyed advantages early in life, have, through merit combined with the unrivalled opportunities which this country presents, risen to station in society. Few of them, it must be thought, even if unaware of the extent of their deficiency in knowledge of their language, are so obtuse as not to perceive their deficiency at all, and not to know that it often presents them in an unfavorable light in their association with the more favoured children of fortune. Few, it must be believed, would not from one motive or the other, from desire for knowledge, or from dread of ridicule, gladly avail themselves of opportunities for instruction.[12]

More than any of the other early prescriptive philologists, Bache realized that the changing nature of American society itself was behind the interest in correct speech and writing that sold so many of the nit-picking books of Alford, Moon, and Gould.

The Alford controversy had powerful consequences in an increasingly self-conscious America. As a result of it, William Mathews wrote in 1876, "hundreds of persons who before felt a profound indifference to this subject. . .have suddenly found themselves . . .deeply interested in questions of grammar, and now, with their appetites whetted, will continue the study. . ."[13] The 1870's and 1880's saw a spate of non-academic little "manuals of correctness" covering both conversation and writing.[14] The general ethos of these manuals can be summed up by the quote from Swift that Alfred Ayres (Thomas E. Osmun) chose as the epigraph to his The Verbalist: A Manual: "As a man is known by his company, so a man's company may be known by his manner of expressing himself." Though we tend today to think of the Gilded Age as a time when wealth, status, and vulgarity combined in an unprecedented way, it was also a time when the concept of "proper society" exerted a powerful conservative influence. Wealth might make vulgarity tolerated, but it could never make arrivistes truly acceptable; thus the children of horny-handed "captains of industry" were carefully tutored by hired intellectuals and shipped to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton to be finished

off. Propriety--most obviously reflected in a person's way of speaking--was the desire of even the crassest "new money," and true propriety could not be purchased; it had to be learned.

Colleges had always assumed part of that burden of socialization, and during the 1870's they began to react directly to these changing cultural attitudes. This was, of course, a period when American college education was undergoing a number of profound shifts in emphasis. For the first time, the professional aspects of a college education were beginning to rival the social aspects. New sorts of schools were opening, and the older college ideal of classical study and mental discipline was fast retreating as colleges, striving to attract students and meet changing cultural needs, instituted sweeping curricular changes. Their potential clientele, they were discovering, no longer consisted of aspiring lawyers, ministers, and gentlemen; the growth of vocational specialties and of the concept of college as training in social acceptability meant that the purposes behind enrollment were much broader. Students wanted something new after the Civil War, and the colleges scrambled to try to give it to them.[15]

Changes in the College Rhetoric Course

It was impossible that the college course in rhetoric and writing should be unaffected by these shifts, and beginning in the 1870's we see the focus of writing instruction in America undergo a radical change. The forty years 1865-1905 were years of wrenching necessity and desperate invention for rhetoric. Like the rest of the traditional college curriculum, rhetorical instruction was forced to move away from the abstract educational ideal of "mental discipline" and toward more immediate instructional goals.[16] The immediate goals, in this case, came to involve, not more effective written

communication, but rather, simple mechanical correctness. Let us examine how this occurred.

First of all, it must be understood that the idea of teaching grammatical or mechanical correctness on the college level does not go farther back than 1870. From the classical period up through 1860 or so, the teaching of rhetoric concentrated on theoretical concerns and contained no mechanical material at all. Usage and style, of course, were major areas of rhetorical consideration, but traditional prescriptive advice in these areas assumed a student able to handle grammatical construction and physical inditing of an acceptable manuscript with complete facility. These were, after all, supposed to be the subjects of students' earlier course, the grammar course taught by the grammaticus, or usher, or master in the boys' school. Such elementary skills as handwriting, punctuation, capitalization, and spelling might be critiqued by the professor of rhetoric, but officially they had no place in rhetoric throughout most of history. They were thought to be the domain of pedagogues and pedants; rhetoric was a higher mystery, the domain of dons and professors, and it did not degrade itself to the level of mere correctness.

In a sense, the history of the college composition course in America is a history of this heretofore "elementary" instruction taking over a commanding place in most teachers' ideas of what rhetoric was. Between 1865 and 1895, such base-level elements of mechanical correctness as grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization, which would never have been found in pre-1850 textbooks, came to usurp much of the time devoted in class to rhetorical instruction and most of the marking of student writing. What came more and more to be taught and enforced was correctness, but as Albert Kitzhaber points out, "the sort of correctness desired was superficial and mechanical."[17] (The

very use of the word "correct" changed between 1870 and 1910 from a meaning of "socially acceptable" to one of "formally acceptable.")

We have already examined some of the general causes of this interest in correctness, but for its direct introduction into the rhetoric course we can also identify a proximate cause: in 1874, Harvard University introduced an entrance examination featuring, for the first time, a writing requirement. The reasons for the introduction of this writing requirement were several: a growing awareness of the importance of linguistic class distinctions in the United States; poor showings in written assignments by Harvard undergraduates; a desire to demonstrate that Harvard had the highest standards and deserved its leadership position in American education; a declaration that henceforward writing would be an important element in the college rhetoric course; perhaps a challenge to the academies that supplied the Cambridge institution with raw material.[18] The examination was introduced and given for the first time during the summer of 1874, and, when the English faculty at Harvard received this first test of candidates' writing ability, they were deeply shocked. The scrawled pages revealed that the graduates of the best academies and preparatory schools in America were writing essays filled with formal and mechanical errors of all sorts. Punctuation, capitalization, spelling, syntax: at every level, error abounded. More than half the students taking these early examinations failed to pass. As Adams S. Hill, who took over the administration of the exam in 1876, put it, "the examination makes a poor showing for the schools that furnish the materials whereof the university which professes to set up the highest standard in America, has to make educated men."[19]

Harvard and other colleges strove mightily to pin the blame for poor freshman writing on the preparatory and secondary schools--where, indeed, much

of it did lie--but at the same time, colleges found themselves forced to deal somehow with the results of the poor training they were decrying. The errors students made on their exams were beginning to get a good deal of publicity and were even becoming something of a national scandal.[20] This could not be borne, and the seventies and eighties saw a good deal of pedagogical innovation as teachers engaged in the first great wave of college-level remedial English.

It was quickly obvious to writing teachers that the old abstract rhetoric of Blair, Whately, and Day would not solve the problems uncovered by the Harvard examinations. What good, they asked, did knowledge of tropes or amplification do a student who could not spell or punctuate? Beginning in the 1870's, college-level teaching tools of a simpler sort began to appear. New texts were published which contained simple right-wrong sentence exercises as well as theoretical advice, and during the late seventies college texts began for the first time to include sections on such simple formal elements of writing as capitalization and punctuation.[21] All sorts of treatments of materials were tried out by teachers, but the most popular was what came to be known to teachers as "grammar." Uncased from its elementary-school framework and its general association with abstract mental discipline, grammar began to be introduced to college students in the 1870's in the hope that somehow a theoretical knowledge of the structure of English would act as a prophylaxis against errors in writing.

Thus was born the soulful trust in the powers of "grammar" that still rules the methods of some instructors today. Teaching abstract grammar did not work in the 1870's as it does not work now; college teachers turned to it out of the idea that somehow students' elementary grammar instruction had not "taken," and that it needed to be repeated until it did somehow take hold.

This was an essentially incorrect idea. As A. S. Hill realized, students wrote poorly because they had never been given any practice in composition during their secondary-school careers; vernacular composition was not taught in most American high schools until the 1880's. Students failed on the Harvard exams because they had never been asked to do much writing, not because they had failed to grasp their elementary grammar lessons. But once the grammar-based college pedagogy became enshrined in textbooks there was no escaping it, as we shall see.

The Harvard exams seemed to pinpoint mechanical problems as the important troubles of freshman writers, and it was natural that such exams would tend to make "error-free" writing the central definition of "good" writing in many teachers' minds. This conception quickly gained great power, and after 1885 or so, the very nature of the freshman writing course came to be defined by error-avoidance rather than by any sort of genuine communicative success. As Kitzhaber points out, this meant in practice that composition had to be taught as series of explicable rules, and that the writing desired from students was writing that violated none of these rules.[22] The rhetorical theory developed between 1865 and 1895 above the sentence level--most importantly, the modes, the paragraph structure, static abstractions, and the methods of development--was all an attempt to rule-govern the written product. The heart of the rules-orientation, however, always remained in grammatical and mechanical rule-application at the sentence level.

After the mid-eighties, this rule-and-form orientation constituted a sort of "hidden agenda" in college writing courses. Unlike the rhetorical theory of the period, which was all developed in textbooks, we find relatively little textbook evidence of the mechanical-correctness aspects of the composition courses of the eighties and nineties. The correctness emphasis was there--as

we know from non-textbook sources--but texts hardly mention it, concerning themselves with paragraphs, modes, abstractions, etc. The fact that college composition was fast becoming error-obsessed was like a shameful secret during this period, mentioned only obliquely. Of the four great rhetorical voices of the fin de siecle period, only one--John Genung--ever wrote a college-level textbook dealing with rule-governed formal correctness; what sketchy treatments there were are found in texts by lesser authors. Albert Kitzhaber infers that this lack of textbook treatment of lower-level mechanical questions is a result of the "paragraph boom" of the nineties and of the low opinion of grammar study developing in the elementary-education level.[23] He is undoubtedly correct, but there is, I believe, a further reason: college teachers were ashamed to be found professing grammar, punctuation, and lower-level skills (as many were in 1971 during the second great remedial period, and as many still are).

Thus, in spite of growing evidence of the poor writing of college freshmen--especially the evidence presented to the sound of trumpets by the Harvard Reports of the nineties--the most notable college teachers of rhetoric refused to publically admit that they should deal with the problem, or that they were dealing with it every day. Instead, they constantly cried out for deliverance by some sort of secondary-school deus ex pedagogia. E. L. Godkin, one of the Harvard Report authors, was the most outraged spokesman for this Old Guard attitude; throughout the nineties he pled that college teachers be "delivered, in large part at least, from the necessity of teaching the rudiments of the language."[24] Barrett Wendell, that enthusiastic man, dealt not at all with mechanics in his famous textbook English Composition, nor did A. S. Hill in his college texts (though he had no aversion to including mechanics in his lower-level texts and in his college-level "adjunct

materials.") John Genung, in spite of having authored the rules-oriented Outlines of Rhetoric in 1893, drew the line at teaching sentence mechanics, sneering in 1900 that basic-level punctuation elements "belong to grammar; they are no more a part of rhetoric than is spelling."[25] And Fred N. Scott, the last of Kitzhaber's "Big Four" rhetoricians (and the most perspicacious), rejected mechanical emphases for somewhat higher reasons: "These matters, after all," he wrote, "are subsidiary. . .They are means to an end. To treat them as an end in and for themselves is to turn education in this subject upside down."[26] As a result of these attitudes, we see very little mechanical material in the most popular rhetoric texts of the late nineteenth century.

In this case, however, these major texts are somewhat misleading. The later 1880's and the 1890's were times of extreme changes in the way that writing was taught--changes half-obscured, but no less real for that. The college rhetoric course was being deformed by novel stresses and was quickly generating new tools to try to solve the problems that were arising. We need now to look more closely at some of these problems and at the solutions they engendered.

Overwork

First of all, we must understand the most pervasive reality of the rhetoric teachers at nearly all colleges after 1870: gross overwork. We may still have a way to go today before teachers are given realistic teaching loads in composition, but the composition instructors of the nineteenth century faced situations far grimmer. It is difficult for us today to imagine, but the standard practice during the period 1880-1910 was for teachers to be assigned writing courses that were lecture-sized. Most teachers were responsible for teaching between 140 and 200 students. Barrett Wendell at

Harvard in 1892 said that he had in his writing class "within one or two of 170 men."[27] This may have been a large class, for Wendell was a popular teacher, but it was by no means extraordinary. (By 1900, Harvard had adopted the policy of hiring non-professorial help to take charge of the freshman course, and there, at least, the average class size dropped to between 60 and 70.)[28] At Yale's Sheffield Scientific School, one professor and one instructor were responsible for 250 students (as well as for three non-freshman courses totaling 306 students.)[29] At the University of Iowa, the average class size for freshman and sophomore courses was 80, and again, over 250 students were the responsibility of one professor and one instructor.[30] At Chicago, which prided itself on its small classes, the courses in "required theme-writing" averaged over 65 students per class.[31]

These very large lecture-sized sections were the result of some of the rapid changes taking place in American universities. As Lawrence Veysey says, after 1870 three basic types of instruction came to prominence: the laboratory, the lecture, and the seminar.[32] The laboratory, of course, was conceived as a specialized scientific instructional form, and the labor-intensive seminar (or seminary, as it was referred to) was usually reserved for upperclass and graduate students. This left the lecture-sized section as the form of choice for most freshman and sophomore courses. The large lecture, of course, is a perfectly defensible technique for courses with testable subject-content that might be fashioned into fruitful lecture material. In composition courses, though, its use, though widespread, always presented problems.

Leaving aside the question of the worth of abstract lecture material to the struggling writer, the large class sizes of lecture-organized sections meant two things: first, that the teacher could give little individual

attention to students, even if a large course was split into smaller classes; and second, that the number of papers each teacher was expected to read and grade was staggering.

There are few statements extant today recording the effect of having to grade hundreds of papers each week on nineteenth-century teachers, but it must have been exhausting. Most teachers tried to present a "stiff upper lip" about their struggles. Here is Barrett Wendell, who in 1884 pioneered the "daily theme," which spread from trend-setting Harvard to many other schools, on his workload during the 1892-3 school year:

> The daily theme, as it exists at Harvard College, started in one of my courses perhaps eight or nine years ago. . .I introduced in my elective course the practice of requiring from every student a daily theme, which consists of a single page of probably fifty to a hundred words. . .I have at this moment in my class at Harvard College within one or two of 170 men, and they write these themes every day, and it happens this year to be my duty to read those every day and to make some sort of note on them. . . of course, I must do it rather hastily. It is a matter of two or three hours a day.[33]

A little math indicates the extent of Wendell's reading. Assuming a 26- week school year, he read 855 themes weekly, or 22,230 for the year. This was, of course, in addition to Harvard's required fortnightly themes, which were longer and had to be critiqued in more depth. 170 of these every two weeks adds 2210 additional papers for the year. Even the effervescent Wendell must have been daunted.

The grading load was terribly heavy even at schools which did not use the daily theme. Fred Newton Scott of the University of Michigan, the greatest rhetorical theorist of the period 1875-1925, was also the most honest and outspoken about the overwork teachers endured:

> . . .I have read and re-read this year something over 3,000 essays, most of them written by a class of 216 students. . .That the

> instructor should somehow lay hold of the student as an individual is, for successful composition work, simply indispensable. . . But. . .in the larger universities the day of small and cosey classes is long past. Now the hungry generations tread us down. We hardly learn the names and faces of our hundreds of students before they break ranks and go their ways, and then we must resume our Sisyphean labors.[34]

Scott paints a dark picture, but it must be accepted as a true one. The reasons for such conditions are not difficult to infer. Then, as now, teachers of composition were ill-organized and suffered from a code of "professionalism" that frowned upon public complaint about conditions. Many were low in status, unsure about how their courses should be run, unwilling to demand changes in conditions. College administrators, for their part, probably did not realize that the introductory English course was qualitatively different from the introductory History course; thus both were organized as large lectures. The result, as we have seen, was destructive overloading of writing teachers. As George R. Carpenter et al put it in 1903, "It is not uncommon for teachers of English. . .who are conducting twenty hours of recitation a week. . .to sit up until twelve o' clock night after night in order to correct the compositions of their pupils."[35] We will never know the degree to which this glut of theme-correcting destroyed rhetoric as a scholarly discipline by driving sensitive scholars into other fields--particularly literature--but it must have been considerable.[36] This situation persisted from around 1880 through the middle part of the 'teens, when conditions slowly began to improve.[37]

Reactions to Overwork: Assignments, Reading Styles, and Adjunct Technology

Faced with this gross overwork and with growing social and professional pressure to enforce "the basics," teachers were forced to evolve strategies to protect themselves from insanity and to get on with their work. We are still

seeing versions today of the strategies, several in nature, evolved by the writing teachers of the late nineteenth century to cope with those conditions.

First of all, teachers moved quickly to scrap the older abstract paper topics that had been popular between 1800 and 1870, substituting instead simpler assignments that could be scanned quickly for obvious flaws. As Kitzhaber shows, the trend was away from assignments requiring special knowledge, complex conceptualizations, or detailed explanations, and toward essays based on personal experience and observation. In terms of the modal division of discourse then popular, it was a switch from an emphasis on exposition (which was more complex in the nineteenth century than it became in the twentieth) and argument to an emphasis on narration and description. Topics such as "Curiosity" or "The Evanescence of Pleasure" were replaced by "Our Newsboy" and "An Early Morning's Fishing" (and eventually by the notorious "How I Spent My Summer Vacation.")[38]

Kitzhaber's contention that this personalization and simplification of theme topics was the result of dissatisfaction with the older abstract topics is certainly true, but he does not go into much depth on the reasons for that dissatisfaction. That such topics as "Selfishness" produced bad writing from college freshmen is easy to understand. More important for the current discussion, however, is the fact that such abstract topics produce writing that is cognitively more demanding and therefore slower to read and grade. I believe that this is the central reason behind the adoption of narrative and descriptive topics; as every teacher knows, personal-experience writing is the easiest reading we see. Criteria for judging narratives and simple descriptions are easy to set, paper content often suggests itself, and the organization of such essays is usually simple chronology or spatial reference. Personal-experience papers can be read and evaluated much more quickly and

with far fewer difficult judgment calls than the older sort of abstract-analysis papers, and in short, the newer topics took over because grading them was easier work for teachers snowed under by too many themes.

With questions of content and organization radically simplified, the reading and grading of student papers entered a whole new era. At some point between 1870 and 1900, the act of a teacher reading and commenting on the general communicative success of a piece of student writing--form and content--was succeeded by a simplified concept: the teacher as spotter and corrector of formal errors. Student essays ceased to be "literary efforts" and became instead exhibits of rule-worship, to be examined "with a lawyer's eye," as Mina Shaughnessy tellingly puts it. Skill in writing, which had traditionally meant the ability to manipulate a complex hierarchy of content-based, organizational, and stylistic goals, came to mean but one thing: error-avoidance.

This new emphasis upon mechanical correctness grew out of the "illiteracy" furor we have discussed, but more importantly out of the understandable need of teachers to somehow deal with their huge stacks of student themes. As every writing teacher knows, truly reading a paper--any paper--is mentally demanding and time-consuming. [illegible]es complete attention to all levels of style, form, meaning, full presence of mind. Full editorial reading is tiring and cannot be done efficiently for long stretches of time.

On the other hand, merely scanning a paper for formal and syntactic correctness is a rather mechanical act; with practice it can be done with almost as little concentration as riding a bicycle. Far more students' papers can be passed through such a mechanism in a given period of time than can be passed through a full reading. The writing teachers of the 1880's and 1890's,

faced with a reading task that was essentially impossible, were forced to cut their losses as best they could; substituting rapid scanning-for-errors in place of full readings, they came to see this simple correcting procedure as what they were expected to do. Yes, they "read" the 170 themes a day or the 216 themes a week--after a fashion. They "corrected" and graded them, and rationalized this sort of reading by claiming that they were giving students what students really needed most. The work was demanding; it took time; it was onerous--but it was not impossible, as genuine reading would have been. Faced with killing work levels, teachers had to give something up; what went, unfortunately, was rhetoric. Real teacher responses to student papers went the same way as complex and challenging assignments.

With primary teacher attention and nearly all paper correction being devoted to the formal aspects of student writing, it was inevitable that the nature of the college composition course should change. During the eighties and nineties we can see the changes slowly taking place, not so much in textbooks as in adjunct technologies. The mechanical grading and evaluation that teachers were being forced into invited mechanical support systems, usually in the form of systems of rules to which students could be referred. These systems of mechanical rules were found in two primary sources: as "composition cards" containing abbreviated rules and correction marks, and later, in specialized textbooks. Let us examine both of these developments.

"Correction Cards," or "Theme Cards," printed on heavy stock and given out to students, were first used in high schools in the 1870's, but their use quickly spread to the college level. The most common sort contained short directions on manuscript preparation and a key to the system of correction marks used by the instructor. Many of these systems of marks were based on the one recommended in E.W. Huffcut's 1887 English in the Preparatory Schools,

but they varied a good deal from school to school. Some sort of card system of this sort was the rule at most colleges by 1890. Adams S. Hill assembled one for sale at Harvard, and many other colleges followed suit. The rules of "grammar" might not be good enough for a place in rhetoric textbooks, but no teacher could do without some means of referring to them. These cards were highly ephemeral and few have survived; the one reprinted here is a high-school card from 1908.[39] (See Figure One)

Use of these cards, while better than nothing, presented several problems. First of all, their correction systems were varied and could be confusing to students. More seriously, they could not provide enough space for satisfactory explanations of the key correction marks. Teachers clearly felt a need for some sort of bridge between the rhetoric texts--which overwhelmingly rejected syntax, grammar, and form as "baby-work"--and composition cards. Such bridges were slow in appearing. A few rhetorics appeared which contained a page of two of composition-card material, but they were the exception rather than the rule.[40]

The Genesis of the Handbook

The obvious answer to the problem was a new sort of textbook, one that would explain and exemplify the sorts of rules that teachers were increasingly asking their students to learn and practice, and through the last quarter of the nineteenth century several attempts to find the form for such a book were made, none of them completely successful. The first and most obvious answer to the problem of teaching students "grammar" (which by 1885 was a sort of catch-all term used by English teachers to mean formal correctness of all kinds) was merely to update the grammar rules taught by elementary schools. This was done by Alonzo Reed and Brainerd Kellogg in their 1877 high-school

text, Higher Lessons in English, and on the college level by Joseph Gilmore in his 1875 text Outlines of the Art of Expression, which used a sort of Baltimore Catechism question-and-answer method to inculcate grammatical rules. The book grew, said Gilmore, "in the author's class-room, out of an attempt to supplement the defective early training of his pupils." Gilmore used an expansive definition of grammar: "Grammar," he said, "may be defined as the art of correctly expressing our thoughts. It lays the foundation for rhetoric, which superinduces, upon mere correctness of expression, Clearness, Energy, and Elegance. . ."[41] Gilmore went on to deal in such questions as "Define a simple sentence and an act of thought," and "Give the exceptions to the general rules for forming the plurals of English nouns."

Gilmore's book had some initial popularity, but his question-answer format was by necessity abstract and hard to use as a reference. Much more popular than Gilmore's approach was the "rules" approach taken by Edwin A. Abbott in his 1874 manual How To Write Clearly: Rules and Exercises. This book, which went through 25 printings between 1874 and 1914, is the earliest recognizable prototype for all the "handbooks of composition" that came after it. "Almost every English boy can be taught to write clearly," said Abbott, "so far at least as clearness depends upon the arrangement of words. . .Clear writing can be reduced to rules."[42] How To Write Clearly contains 56 rules, most of them dealing with sentence construction and style, many of them similar to certain of today's handbook prescriptions. Unlike Gilmore's question-answers, Abbott expressed his rules in positive commandments followed by exemplifications and explanations: "32. In a long conditional sentence put the 'if-clause' antecedent, or protasis, first," and "41. Antithesis adds force, and often clearness." Abbott covered few questions of usage, no spelling or punctuation, very little basic syntax or grammar; and yet it was

in print for over 40 years. Harvard required students to purchase the book through the 1880's, and it also seems to have been required at different times by Oberlin and the Universities of Pennsylvania, Virginia, Michigan, and Colorado.[43] As early as 1880, teachers were casting about for convenient systems of enforceable reference rules.

What is most surprising about Abbott is not that it was fairly popular, but that it was not more widely copied. A few texts appeared during the eighties that treated of mechanics--punctuation, usage, etc.--but no American authors seemed willing to write an Abbott-style rulebook treating all of the questions of mechanics. In 1893, John Genung published his Outlines of Rhetoric, which was organized according to rules but which is more accurately seen as the first college-level Basic Writing text that as a book in the reference mode. Genung's attitude toward basic-level instruction in the elements of correctness was paradoxical; he was the only one of the "Big Four" to write anything like a remedial-English college text, yet he did not seem proud of his chosen task: "(Rhetoric) has as its lower and elementary stages, comprising the procedures that lie at the foundation of all composition, things which it is not so much an honor to know as a reproach not to know; these are what the present treatise is mainly concerned with. . ."[44] Genung proposed that these basic areas could be reduced to 73 rules, based on Usage, Phraseology, and Style, which he numbered consecutively and printed as side-headings throughout the text; a digest of them was printed at the end of the book "to facilitate the correction of the student's written work." "By simply writing the number of the rule in the margin of the student's paper," wrote Genung, "The teacher can call his attention to the error involved."

Outlines was another popular success for Genung, who was one of the first English authors to make textbooks financially rewarding, and it remained in

use until at least 1915. As mentioned earlier, however, it started no trends, and the influential textbooks of the time remained set against treatments of basic mechanical material. The authors of the eighties and nineties were the last composition teachers trained in the remnants of the great tradition of rhetoric, and they would not recant their beliefs that rhetoric involved higher mysteries than grammatical correctness.

The day of the rhetoricians, however, was passing, and the day of the composition pedagogues was dawning. The spirit of questing experimentation that had fueled composition in the nineties failed after 1900, and as the torch of rhetorical theory guttered, the practical problems of classroom pedagogy came to the fore. By 1905, Hill, Genung, and Wendell had all but retired from teaching and writing about composition, and the few rhetorical theorists still active at that time--mainly F. N. Scott and his disciples--were increasingly voices crying in the wilderness. Textbooks at this time became predictable and derivative, unwilling to experiment with new treatments. Materials on mechanical correctness bloomed, and in 1907 there appeared a new sort of textbook, the logical culmination of the move toward rule-governed composition that had been going on since 1875: the modern handbook of composition.[45]

The first handbook was Edwin C. Woolley's Handbook of Composition: A Compendium of Rules. Woolley provided in a primitive form nearly all of the elements that make up today's handbooks: it dealt with punctuation, spelling, legibility, sentence structure. The Handbook saw no element of writing as beneath its scope; it had no rhetorical pretensions. Woolley himself argued the case for his handbooks most succinctly in his 1909 Mechanics of Writing:

> The chief benefit derived from theme-writing lies probably in the instructor's indication of errors in the themes and his showing how these errors are to be corrected. . .But. . .how shall the

> instructor, as he indicates these eight hundred errors (in the fifty themes he must hand back the next day), furnish the information called for by each one? Obviously he must use some kind of shorthand. Suppose, then, that he writes opposite the incorrect " whom' above quoted the expression "Gr." or "b.E." or "case." Do these expressions furnish the student with the information he needs regarding that "whom"? It seems to me that they do not. . .
>
> Yet shorthand must be used in correcting themes. Is there no system of shorthand which conveys to the student the information he should have regarding each error marked in his themes? There is such a system; it consists of references to a book. . .The Handbook was designed, and the present book has been designed, to be used in this way.[46]

This was Woolley's credo. And how did teachers react to this new sort of text? With overwhelming approbation. In a representative review in 1909, H.E. Coblentz spoke for most of the college teachers of the day: "This little book deserves the utmost praise. . .Every teacher of English will find this the handiest book of its kind."[47] At last the cat was out of the bag, and teachers of writing no longer tried to hide the primarily mechanical nature of their readings.

With the Handbook, Woolley began what would later be referred to as "the Woolley Family" of handbooks, a family still represented by the collateral descendent of the 1907 Handbook, today's Heath Handbook, 10th edition. He also began the handbook era, initiating a new sort of writing text that would quickly come to be at the heart of most college writing courses. Since the first Woolley Handbook, composition pedagogy has been transformed. Needs had shaped the texts, and now the texts shaped the writing courses; this was especially true of handbooks, which were always the favorite texts of untrained writing teachers and thus exerted a great, although often hidden, influence.

The twenty years following the Woolley Handbook might be called the Great Handbook Boom. Between 1907 and 1927 at least fifteen different handbooks

were published.[48] As important as the numbers of handbooks, however, were the changes the handbook form was causing in the rhetoric texts of the period and the broadening of the purposes of the handbooks themselves. Beginning around 1910 we see the rapid crumbling of rhetoric texts' authors' unwillingness to include mechanical-correctness materials in their books. Clippinger's Illustrated Lessons, Foerster and Steadman's Sentences and Thinking, Young and Young's Freshman English all reflected a novel handbook-oriented emphasis on lower-level elements of mechanical correctness: punctuation, spelling, grammar. Clippinger in 1912 actually included a separate handbook section in his rhetoric--probably the first such conjunction. During this period the last vestiges of the old abstract-theory tradition in composition died out, and with it died any sense of professional history. By 1925 most of the great nineteenth-century rhetorical theorists had been forgotten, and their doctrines were assumed to have always existed. In the hands of overworked part-timers and graduate students, Freshman English entered its Dark Ages: unenlightened toil, a benighted processing of students through the obstacle course of mechanical correctness.

In "Handbooks: History of a Genre" I have discussed how the home-reference handbook of Woolley grew first into a book of rules and exercises and then into a full-scale textbook meant for use both at home and in class: the rhetoric-handbook. Woolley and Scott's College Handbook of Composition in 1928 marked the beginning of this phase of textbook development, a phase which effectually meant that the mechanical organization and algorithmic rule-governed approach of the handbook extended themselves into all aspects of rhetoric. The predictable result was that the derivative rhetorical theory of

the period became even more debased, even more removed from the actual process of communication. Handbook rhetoric was always the most reductive form of current-traditional dogma, and by the 1920's there was little rhetorical theory not influenced by handbook approaches. Fewer and fewer rhetoric texts were found that did not incorporate a handbook or rules-type section, and after 1925 or so it seemed a tacit assumption that the average composition course was an essentially remedial endeavor. As John French said in his book Writing in 1924: "This book attempts to supply in one volume material adequate for such a course in English Composition as includes the review of elementary principles and the anticipation of mature studies in English and other subjects. Consequently it gives much space to rules for correctness."[49] For the freshman of 1924, mature writing was something only anticipated.

Bereft of a theoretical discipline and a professional tradition, teachers during this period had nothing to turn to for information about their subject--except their textbooks. It is during the first two decades of this century that we first see the pattern of writing teachers as the only college-level instructors who know no more of their discipline than is contained in the texts they assign their students--a sad pattern that still, alas, continues today at too many schools. And when we examine the books these teachers of the 1920's depended upon, it is not difficult to see why I. A. Richards called rhetoric "the dreariest part of the waste the unfortunate travel through" during their first year of college. Quite literally, after 1925, handbooks and handbook-rhetorics were in control of composition classes. A survey taken in 1927 showed that of 27 representative colleges in the Midwest, 85% used handbooks in their writing courses--and more importantly, 41% used no texts

but handbooks.[50] Rhetoric had truly been transmogrified into the dread discipline of "Freshman English."

Remedial Technology

If the period 1875-1900 nurtured the elements leading to an obsession with mechanical correctness and the period 1900-1925 turned composition from a subject (distantly) concerned with communication into an error-hunt, the period following 1925 was what might be called the remedial-technology era. It was a time when composition teachers, at their nadir in terms of experience and interest, were lured farther and farther into mechanism by ever-more-sophisticated "classroom aids" put out by textbook firms. Handbooks became the central reference point for teachers who had never studied any rhetorical theory (and no teacher English-trained could have been taught rhetoric between 1915 and 1950); even those whose training in critical reading made them sensitive readers of student writing were too overworked to bring useful criticism to bear on the papers they graded, and these teachers did what they could: they enforced correctness and made it the heart of their demands.

We cannot overestimate the effect of textbooks on the teaching and paper-grading done during this period; it was everything. Especially influential were the handbooks, which after 1930 assumed a larger and larger place in the pedagogical scene and eventually became the single most important element of stability in the entire composition course. Writing in 1941, James McCrimmon identified the reasons behind the growth of popularity of handbooks: their role in transmitting values. "Instructors," said McCrimmon, "not only consult the handbook they are using, they are likely to con it, get it by heart, pledge indiscriminate devotion to it. Herein lies its power. . .for the English handbook is often the teacher's teacher." Since most composition

teachers were untrained graduate students without experience, McCrimmon stated, they have no idea what besides the handbook to teach:

> Little wonder that in such a sea of confusion he (the teacher) clings to his handbook as a shipwrecked sailor clings to his raft, and by an interesting human weakness, soon comes to believe that these rules, which only yesterday were unknown to him, are the sole criteria of good writing.[51]

Forty-two years later, the phenomenon remarked by McCrimmon is still with us.

Handbooks arrived and proliferated because they were tools for the task of enforcing correctness. Their main purpose, in theory at least, was as support systems for instruction that was still supposed to be rhetorical: student essays read by the teacher. Following closely behind handbooks, however, were their dark siblings: drillbooks and workbooks, which introduced completely a-rhetorical practice in error-recognition and sentence-construction into the college writing course. Beginning in the mid-twenties and becoming a thriving industry by 1935, the "remedial racket," as Porter Perrin called it, intruduced high-school-level exercises in grammar, punctuation, and usage into college classrooms. Such books as Howard Grose's Exercises in Everyday Writing, Dana Jensen's Corrective English Exercises, and Easley Jones' Practical English Drillbook were selling well by the mid-thirties, and college composition was close to its most mechanistic point. Perrin's voice was one of the few raised in protest against the workbook approach:

> These exercises obviously violate the lone principle that present teachers of composition have salvaged from the 2500 years of the discipline of rhetoric, that one learns to speak and write by speaking and writing. . .Why do we adopt them? Well, they're easy to handle: like every popular "advance" in pedagogical method, they are ultimately easier for the teacher. . .We find a comforting certainty in grading exercises in the most elementary conventions of the language that is a great relief in a field where so little is certain, where the real work is eliciting variables in a growth.

> We may realize that these absolutely certain elements are few and are the least, or at any rate the lowest, factors in style. But we cannot help breathing more freely as we pass from the sand of better-or-worse to the pavement of supposed right-or-wrong.[52]

Perrin could certainly understand the weakness that made teachers turn to drillbooks, but he could not condone it. His was the first voice in a rising chorus of criticism of the status quo in college composition that began in the 1930's.

The Loyal Opposition

It was during this decade that we see the beginnings of the curious schizophrenia that has afflicted college composition since: the split between the scholars and theoreticians of the discipline and the great mass of classroom teachers. The descent into mechanism that occurred in the thirties was a result of the beliefs and activities of the latter group, but we must note that it took place against a background of serious and capable research and even protest from the former. Scholars of language began during this decade to bring together some of the research that had been ongoing since the teens; studies of errors in writing, of remedial techniques, of the efficacy of grammar drill were all scrutinized, and all of them pointed to the conclusion that the popular sorts of classroom grammar drills were essentially futile as attempts to improve student writing.[53] Sterling Leonard's pioneering study Current English Usage appeared in 1932, striking a powerful blow against the prescriptive-usage doctrines that were part of the mechanical-correctness tradition. The NCTE, which had existed since 1911, truly found its voice during the 1930's and began to declaim a Deweyite gospel of education for social goals, "tying up literature and composition with the business of living."54 These pragmatic goals usually meant that the

organization worked against sterile drills and mechanistic pedagogies. In sum, a motley crowd of linguists, educationists, and rhetoricians began to coalesce during the thirties and to struggle against the overwhelmingly mechanical classroom methods of the time.

It looked at first to be a futile battle. The forces of overwork and professionally-countenanced ignorance were very great. Handbooks, workbooks, drillbooks appeared in larger numbers each year, continuing the feedback loop of mechanical criteria as the only valid criteria of good writing. But the seeds of dissent had been planted, and through the forties and fifties the anti-mechanical reaction to the standard composition course began to grow strong in the profession of English. Rhetoric, which had been dormant within composition since the 1890's, began to make a reappearance after 1944, when the first communications courses were taught at the University of Iowa. Communications courses quickly spread to other schools, bringing together scholars from English and Speech departments for the first time since the tragic split between the disciplines that occurred in 1914, teaching all four of the "communications skills"--reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Rhetoric, which had been in the keeping of Speech departments during the twentieth century, was a vital part of these courses, and many English teachers learned for the first time what some of the alternatives to mechanical correctness might be.

This re-introduction of rhetoric into composition was to prove extremely vivifying. The idea of successful communication and not mere grammatical correctness as the central aim of writing was novel and exciting to English scholars, who once again began to investigate the great traditions of rhetoric; the newly-formed Conference on College Composition and Communication became the professional vehicle for this movement away from composition-as-

grammar. It was inevitable that large parts of this emergency scholarship would involve intense self-criticism by English teachers, and indeed, beginning around the late forties, we do hear voices raised in plaintive criticism of the methods of brother teachers both past and present. Porter Perrin, who had been a soldier in the rhetorical trenches for over twenty years, spoke in 1951 of the years 1900-1935 as "a conspicuously narrow era of instruction" which showed "a general surrender of the broad aims that have made the study (of rhetoric) great to a concentration on minutiae of usage (actually a triumph of grammar over rhetoric)."[55]

By this time, however, Perrin's voice was not the only one being raised in criticism of the mechanical-correctness emphasis in writing instruction. Others were coming to the realization that student disgust for the writing course was no irrational response. Ruth Davies in 1950 wrote that "many teachers of freshman English waste much of their energy trying to enforce rules and standards universally ignored. . .While we are engrossed with the scrawny skin and brittle bones of composition, the flesh and blood and heart of the matter are almost forgotten."[56] Jacques Barzun struck out at the hypocrisy of educational systems that claimed to be "progressive" and eschew narrow insistance on formal correctness--but continued to enforce it:

> I know very well that correctness was supposedly given up long ago. The modern teacher does not mention it. But if the teacher marks spelling and grammatical errors and speaks of little else, what is a child to think?. . . Meanwhile the things that are teachable, the ways of translating the flashes of thought into consecutive sentences, are neglected.[57]

And Barriss Mills, in his seminal "Writing as Process" of 1953, strongly condemned the "police-force concept of usage" that still prevailed in most classrooms. "Nothing is more blighting," wrote Mills, "to natural and

functional written communication than an excessive zeal for purity of usage in mechanics."[58]

All of this criticism of the traditional mechanical priorities appeared during the late forties and early fifties in what can only be called a spontaneous reaction to a notably deficient pedagogical paradigm, a revolt against the current-traditional methods of teaching and thinking about composition that took its impetus from the rediscovery of rhetorical issues as they applied to writing. From its beginning in the late 1940's, this revolt gathered strength during the fifties and suddenly burst into full flower during the early sixties. Suddenly theorists and teachers everywhere were actively--and sometimes heatedly--discussing the purposes and methods of teaching composition, and the reign of mechanical correctness, which had largely depended on continued teacher ignorance, was being threatened.

I need not, I think, rehearse here the disputes of the last two decades over such issues as formal marking, theme correction, the nature of revision, the teaching of grammar. These debates can all be viewed as the mechanical-correctness tradition defending itself against attacks made in the name of rhetorical priority. On the one hand are the theorists, the rhetoricians, the proponents of writing as discovery or communication; on the other are the traditionalists, the front-line teachers, the proponents of writing as vocational skill. Both sides make valid points, and if the rhetoricians often get the best of the abstract arguments, the traditionalists can still point to savage overwork as an occupational reality for many writing teachers--a reality that makes real rhetorical instruction difficult or impossible. A teacher with 100 papers to grade in a weekend, say the traditionalists, cannot possibly respond effectively to each one as communication--and they are right.

There is no doubt that the composition-as-mechanical-correctness tradition has suffered serious setbacks during the last thirty years, but it is not a tradition that can be overcome so long as administrative priorities overwork undertrained teachers. There are still too many "four and four" teaching assignments, and such cynical exploitation of the victims of the depressed academic marketplace only creates grist for the mills of mechanism. Of the making of handbooks there is no end--and too many teachers are still given no training beyond their Harbrace charts. Overwork and ignorance have ever been the parents of destructive overemphasis on mechanical correctness, and these are not conditions we can get rid of easily.

We can, however, rejoice in the gains we have made. At last the reductive traditions of the first half of the century are being questioned and challenged. Teachers are better-trained every year. Newer textbooks are providing even traditionally-oriented teachers with more defensible course content than the "shall-will" rules. Administrators have gradually been made to understand that 40 students are too many for one class, and most now accept 30 as too many. We may eventually be able to convince them that 25 are too many as well, and that four writing courses per term is too heavy a load for any teacher. We have made strides, and more will be made.

The enforcement of standards of mechanical correctness is not a tradition that can--or should--die out of composition instruction. Mechanical errors, as Mina Shaughnessy says, are "unprofitable intrusions upon the consciousness of the reader" which "demand energy without giving any return in meaning," and helping students overcome their own unintentional sabotage of the process of communicating their thoughts is certainly an important part of our work. But it is not all of our work. Striking a balance between formal and rhetorical considerations is the problem we now face, and it is a delicate one. We

cannot escape the fact that in a written text any question of mechanics is also a rhetorical question, and as a discipline we are still trying to understand the meaning of that conjunction. We may spend the rest of our professional lives investigating how the balance between rhetoric and mechanics can best be struck--a difficult question, but one heartening to see asked, for the fact that we are confronting such questions shows that composition studies is once again a genuine discipline and no longer a purblind drifting on the current of unexamined tradition.

NOTES

1 Tewksbury lists 54 American colleges extant in 1831; this was just prior to the great Protestant college-building boom of the period 1830-1850. See Donald G. Tewksbury, The Founding of American Colleges and Universities Before the Civil War (New York: Teachers' College, Columbia University, 1932), pp. 32-54.

2 Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America, trans. George Lawrence (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), p. 55.

3 Tocqueville, Democracy in America, p. 480.

4 It is no accident that around this time we also see the beginnings of dialect humor in the Sam Slick books, the writings of Artemus Ward, etc.

5 Rollo LaVerne Lyman, English Grammar in American Schools Before 1850 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1922), p. 5. As Lyman shows, the period 1820-1850 saw the largest number of new grammar texts appear. Numbers are: 1811-1820--41 texts; 1821-1830--84; 1831-1840--63; 1841-1850--66. (Lyman, p. 80.)

6 Edward Finegan, Attitudes Toward English Usage: The History of a War of Words (New York: Teachers' College Press, 1980), pp. 47-54. Another well-written source on certain nineteenth-century language phenomena is Dennis E. Baron, Grammar and Good Taste: Reforming the American Language (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). Baron concentrates more on linguistic protest and reform movements, Finegan more on the history of usage debates. Both perspectives are useful to anyone studying the development of composition in America.

7 Andrew Peabody, Conversation: Its Faults and Its Graces (Boston: Sheperd and Lee, 1867), pp. 10-11.

8 Seth T. Hurd, A Grammatical Corrector (Philadelphia: E.H. Butler and Co., 1847), p. v.

9 Alford was actually anti-Union (he was an open Confederate sympathizer like many Britons), but he extended his critique to all Americans.

10 Henry Alford, A Plea for the Queen's English (London: Alexander Strahan, 1864), pp. 5-6.

11 Edward S. Gould, Good English, or, Popular Errors in Language (New York: W.J. Widdleton, 1867), p. 1.

12 (Richard Meade Bache), Vulgarisms and Other Errors of Speech (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen, and Haffelfinger, 1869), Preface.

13 William Mathews, Words: Their Use and Abuse (Chicago: S.C. Griggs, 1876), p. 5.

14 See, for instance, Alfred Ayres (Thomas E. Osmun), The Verbalist: A Manual (New York: D. Appleton, 1881), and the Sheperd and Lee series of social-language handbooks, including Samuel Fallows' Discriminate! of 1885 and Harlan H. Ballard's Handbook of Blunders of the same year. Probably the longest-lived of these handbooks of linguistic arrivisme was Oliver Bell Bunce's classic Don't! (New York: D. Appleton), which appeared in 1883 and was last reprinted in 1921.

15 A good overview of this period is found in Frederick Rudolph, The American College and University: A History (New York: Knopf, 1962).

16 For information on this movement, see Lawrence R. Veysey, The Emergence of the American University (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), pp. 1-20, 57-118.

17 Albert R. Kitzhaber, Rhetoric in American Colleges, 1850-1900 (Dissertation, University of Washington, 1953), p. 312.

18 The only dependable information we have on the introduction of this examination seems to be in A. S. Hill's essay "An Answer to the Cry for More English," and Hill was not even on the Harvard faculty when the exam was first introduced in 1874. (He took it over two years later.) The essay is found in Twenty Years of School and College English (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1896).

19 A. S. Hill, "An Answer to the Cry for More English," p. 11.

20 They were even provoking scornful laughter from the general public. See Caroline B. Le Row, English As She Is Taught: Genuine Answers to Examination Questions in our Public Schools (New York: Cassell, 1887), which prints funny examples of student writing. Example: a definition of "inertia" as "the negative quality of passiveness either in recoverable latency or incipient latescence." The beginning of a long tradition of rather cruel humor.

21 See, for instance, Henry Jameson, Rhetorical Method (St. Louis: G.I. Jones & Co., 1879), and Henry Coppens, A Practical Introduction to English Rhetoric: Precepts and Exercises (New York: Catholic School Book Co., 1880).

22 Kitzhaber, Rhetoric in American Colleges, p. 319.

23 Kitzhaber, p. 306.

24 E. L. Godkin, "The Illiteracy of American Boys," Educational Review 8 (1897), 7.

25 John F. Genung, The Working Principles of Rhetoric (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1900), p. 128n.

26 Fred Newton Scott, "What the West Wants in Preparatory English," School Review 17 (1909), 19.

27 Barrett Wendell, "English Work in the Secondary Schools," School Review 1 (1893), 659-660.

28 C. T. Copeland and H. M. Rideout, Freshman English and Theme-Correcting in Harvard College (New York: Silver, Burdett, 1901), p. 1.

29 William Morton Payne, ed., English in American Universities (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1895), p. 30.

30 Payne, English in American Universities, p. 83.

31 Payne, p. 86.

32 Veysey, The Emergence of the American University, p. 153.

33 Wendell, "English Work in the Secondary Schools," pp. 659-660.

34 Fred Newton Scott, in Payne, English in American Universities, pp. 121-122.

35 George R. Carpenter, Franklin T. Baker, and Fred N. Scott, The Teaching of English in the Elementary and Secondary School (New York: Longmans, Green, 1903), p. 329

36 This is illustrated by "a private letter by a teacher in an Eastern University" quoted in Carpenter et al, in which the anonymous author says, "I have never done any rhetorical work at_____except in connection with my courses in literature, and I thank God I have been delivered from the bondage of theme-work into the glorious liberty of literature." (p. 329n)

37 It was early obvious that the lecture-sized class was the wrong sort of setting for composition, but nineteenth-century administrators, as many today still do, turned their backs on the obvious evidence of overwork and meditated instead on the bottom line. Seminar-type writing courses seem never to have been considered, but some schools were wealthy enough or had prestigious enough faculty members so that their writing courses were taught as "laboratory" courses. John Genung at Amherst led this movement most

obviously. These first lab-type courses were not much different from regular classes except in their numbers--Henry Frink, the freshman teacher at Amherst, had five assistants for a class of 110 students--but numbers were so important that a movement in favor of composition as "laboratory work" became very vocal and had by 1900 gained some power. If composition is truly laboratory work, said Fred Scott in 1895, "why should it not be placed on the same footing as other laboratory work as regards manning and equipment?"

Such support, despite outcries from teachers, was not rapidly forthcoming. In 1911, the NEA and NCTE organized a committee to investigate the labor involved in composition teaching. Edwin M. Hopkins, chair of this committee, said in his first report that "composition teaching has been described as a 'laboratory subject' for a fairly long time," but that adequate conditions had never been provided for such teaching and only existed, when they did, as "the result of a fortunate chance." The Hopkins Committee Report, issued in 1912, put their findings bluntly:

> Under present average conditions, English teachers are assigned more than twice as much work as they can do. Some of them try to do it by working more than twice as much as other teachers do. This is wrong, because it disables them. Others do only what they reasonably can and let the rest go. This is wrong in another way, because it is an injustice to the pupil and a waste of his time. . . Under present average conditions of teaching English expression, workmen must choose between overwork and bad work; between spoiling their material or killing themselves. . . (Edwin M. Hopkins, "The Labor and Cost of Composition Teaching: The Present Conditions," Proceedings of the NEA 50 [1912], 750.)

This report was the first shot in an NCTE campaign to lower class size in writing courses, a campaign that has lasted into our time. Conditions did improve during the twenties and thirties; by that time, however, teachers had been set in pedagogies shaped by the bad old days.

38 See Kitzhaber's discussion of this change in Rhetoric in American Colleges, pp. 169-177.

39 This correction card is reprinted from M. Atkinson Williams, Report on the Teaching of English in the United States (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1908). Williams, a young Englishwoman touring the schools and colleges of the U.S. in order to report on their methods to her fellow Britons, says about the use of these cards, "I wish I could be sure that the pupils made as much use of them as the teachers." (p. 52).

40 See, for instance, William Williams, Composition and Rhetoric by Practice (Boston: D.C. Heath & Co., 1890) and Edward R. Shaw, English Composition by Practice (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1892).

41 Joseph H. Gilmore, Outlines of the Art of Expression (Boston: Ginn Bros., 1876), p. 5.

42 Edwin A. Abbott, How To Write Clearly: Rules and Exercises on English Composition (Boston: Roberts Bros., 1874), p. 5.

43 This is an extrapolation from data in the National Union Catalog.

44 John F. Genung, Outlines of Rhetoric (Boston: Ginn & Co., 1893), pp. 3-4.

45 See my essay-bibliography "Handbooks: History of a Genre" (forthcoming, I hope) for more detailed information on this extremely important textbook form.

46 Edwin C. Woolley, The Mechanics of Writing (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1909), pp. vi-viii.

47 H. E. Coblentz, review of Edwin C. Woolley, Handbook of Composition, School Review 17 (1909), 581.

48 See the bibliography at the end of "Handbooks" for the authors, titles, and dates of these handbooks.

49 John C. French, Writing: A Textbook of Structure, Style, and Usage (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1924), p. v. Italics are mine.

50 Ralph L. Henry, "Freshman English in the Middle West," English Journal 17 (1928), 302-304.

51 James M. McCrimmon, "The Importance of the Right Handbook," College English 3 (1941), 70-71.

52 Porter G. Perrin, "The Remedial Racket," English Journal 22 (1933), 384-388.

53 See, for instance, Roy Ivan Johnson, "Persistency of Error in English Composition," School Review 25 (1917), 555-580, and William Asker, "Does Knowledge of Formal Grammar Function?" School and Society 17 (1923), 109-111.

54 Stella S. Center, "The Liberalism of the NCTE," Education 53 (1932), 164.

55 Porter G. Perrin, "A Professional Attitude for Teachers of Communications," Education 72 (1951), 488.

56 Ruth Davies, "A Defense of Freshmen," College English 12 (1950), 442.

57 Jacques Barzun, "English As She's Not Taught," Atlantic Monthly (December, 1953), pp. 28-29.

58 Barriss Mills, "Writing as Process," College English 15 (1953), 21.